The Fear of Laughter in Restoration Prose Fiction

Jorge Figueroa-Dorrego
(Universidade de Vigo, España)

Abstract   This article draws on recent studies on the fear of derisive laughter (or 'gelotophobia') in order to relate them to early modern comments on laughter and to the representation of that anxiety in some texts of Restoration prose fiction, and with a particular emphasis on Alexander Oldys's *The Fair Extravagant* (1682). Gelotophobia is a variant of shame anxiety and a social phobia defined as the pathological fear of being an object of laughter. Although the fear shown in the texts analysed is not pathological, it certainly reveals the strong pressure of the shame culture and gender politics prevailing in Restoration England.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Shame and the Fear of Laughter. – 3 The Fear of Laughter in Early Modern England. – 4 The Fear of Laughter in Restoration Prose Fiction. – 5 Conclusion.

Keywords   Gelotophobia. Theory of laughter. Social shame. Restoration prose fiction. Alexander Oldys.

1   Introduction[1]

A fairly recent development in humour research is the study of the fear of being an object of laughter, mostly from a psychological perspective. In the nineties psychotherapist Michael Titze coined the term 'gelotophobia' to refer to that pathology, using the Greek words *gelos* (laughter) and *phobia* (fear). And in the last ten years there has been a remarkable increase in the studies on this matter that have led, for instance, to the publication of special issues in journals such as *Humor* (2009) and *Psychological Test and Assessment Modeling* (2010). Among these publications, the work of Willibald Ruch and René Proyer has been crucial for the expansion from a clinical perspective to a wider conceptualisation of gelotophobia as an individual differences phenomenon, because it only becomes pathological when it appears without sufficient cause, with extraordinary intensity, and during a long period of time. And there is a wide range of possibilities, from little to extreme fear of being laughed at (Ruch 2009, 6-8).

113

What I intend to do in this article is to draw on that recent research on gelotophobia and on more general studies of laughter and the social aspect of humour in order to apply them to an analysis of the representation of the fear of derisive laughter in early modern English prose fiction, with a particular emphasis on Alexander Oldys's *The Fair Extravagant* (1682). I will start with some additional words about gelotophobia, then I will connect this to comments on laughter written by authors such as Philip Sidney, Robert Burton, John Dryden, Thomas Hobbes, Isaac Barrow, and Joseph Addison; and, finally I will focus on the anxiety caused by the scornful laughter that some characters of Restoration novels suffer, as well as the relationship that this has with the shame culture and gender ideology prevailing at the time.

2 Shame and the Fear of Laughter

Ridicule may induce negative emotions, like shame or anger. While we all may feel more or less upset when we are ridiculed, gelotophobes develop a habitual fear of laughter (Platt, Ruch 2009, 91-2). This happens also when the laugher intends no harm and is just being playful. Gelotophobes tend to experience laughter as something negative, as a means that others use in order to put them down (Proyer, Ruch 2010, 50).[2] This hypersensitivity towards others' laughter is due to a low level of self-esteem and a high level of shame; it reveals a combination of neurotic and paranoid tendencies (see Ruch, Proyer 2009, and Titze 2009). Gelotophobes tend to be emotionally unstable and introverted and, consequently, try to avoid social situations in which they may feel ashamed and insecure. Possible causes of gelotophobia may include physical appearance deviating from the norm, having certain disabilities, unorthodox behaviour or attitudes, or lack of familiarity with habits and cultural peculiarities. And its consequences may be introversion, social withdrawal, low life satisfaction, low self-esteem, low cheerfulness, depression, and difficulty in regulating emotions in general (Ruch et al. 2014, 33-8).

According to Titze (2009, 29-30), gelotophobia is a variant of shame-bound anxiety and a social phobia. Shame-bound anxiety is the result of an excessive self-observation and self-control, and is related to feelings of inferiority, insecurity, and self-contempt. Individuals with this kind of anxiety expect rejection by others, and this impairs their interpersonal relationships. They believe their actions are often ridiculous and fear humiliation as a punishment for their failures.

---

2 According to Titze (2009, 31), "[t]he general state of gelotophobes is 'agelatic', i.e., they are not able to appreciate the benefits of laughter", because they do not interpret it as "a positive element of shared identity" or as a relaxing and joyful experience.

A social phobia is a persistent fear of one or more social situations in which a person is exposed to possible scrutiny by others. The individual is afraid that s/he will act in an embarrassing or humiliating manner, so they endure those situations with intense anxiety or try to avoid them altogether. Therefore, the concept of social phobia overlaps with that of shame, and gelotophobia is related to both concepts. Recent studies have argued that shame is a self-regulation emotion crucial to social control, and that it is an innate affect that inhibits and interrupts pleasure (Platt, Ruch 2009, 93). The manner in which people use and interpret laughter is often an important element in this process, because laughing may be used to repel and try to correct deviant actions. This way, it may have an aggressive, corrective function, which attempts to bring non-conforming individuals into line and to reinforce group homogeneity (Ruch, Proyer 2009, 49; Titze 2009, 34). In 1900 Henri Bergson already pointed out that laughter could be a form of social control, intending to uphold conventions and order: "[o]ur laughter is always the laughter of a group", as it always implies a complicity with other laughers, either real or imaginary (1980, 64). Therefore, it has a social signification. It is "a sort of *social gesture*. By the fear which it inspires, it restrains eccentricity" (73; italics in the original). It may correct manners through the humiliation of those who deviate from the opinions, likes and conducts of the social group the laughers belong to, or that prevail in society in general. In Bergson's words:

> Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness. (187)

Many researchers of the late twentieth century insisted on the social function of humour, for instance William Martineau, who argues that

> [h]umor is used to express grievances or can be directed at someone in the group who either has not learned or has violated the norms of the group. Humor constitutes a symbol of disapproval – a subtle way of sanctioning the deviant [...] Humor, therefore, acts as a safety valve for expressing grievance or controlled hostility against deviance. The result is that the normative system is reinforced and social cohesion prevails. (1972, 117)[3]

---

3 Some humour theorists, such as John Morreall, also highlight the social value of laughter but from a different point of view. "Laughing together unites people" (Morreall 1983, 115) because humour facilitates social interaction. For instance, it is often used to set up a mood of acceptance when meeting new acquaintances, or when speaking in public. It may help to avoid confrontation.

Dolf Zillman and Joanne Cantor postulate the so-called "disposition theory" of humour, which posits that, in cases of disparagement humour, "appreciation varies inversely with the favourableness of the disposition toward the agent or entity being disparaged, and varies directly with the favourableness of the disposition toward the agent or entity disparaging it" (1976, 100-1) – in other words, we laugh more when we dislike the person or thing being debased and when we like the individual or medium that ridicules them. Literary scholar James English also follows Bergson's views on the social aspect of laughter, and contends that comic transactions are always related to the conflicts of social life, the relationships of solidarity and hierarchy, and the heterogeneity of society. The comic object belongs to a particular group of society whose symbolic denigration or exclusion provokes the laughter of a group hostile to it (English 1994, 9-10).

More modern social identity theories similarly argue that one of the means that the different groups in society use for attaining "positive distinctiveness", i.e. recognition, is disparagement humour, which involves "the denigration, derogation, or belittlement of a given target" (Ferguson, Ford 2008, 296 and 283). More recently, Thomas Ford has defended the prejudiced norm theory, according to which disparagement humour may be a releaser of prejudice, a medium for communicating derision of social groups. When we receive a humorous message, we abandon the standard mode of information processing for a non-critical humour mindset, thus disparagement humour diminishes its target, particularly when we are prejudiced against the disparaged group and, as a consequence, we tend to assent to a prejudiced norm in the immediate social context. Besides, disparagement humour evokes a shared understanding of its implicit message among those who approve of it and, therefore, can easily adopt that non-critical mindset. That is to say, humour discourse entails a sort of social contract among those who participate in it (Ford, Richardson, Petit 2015, 174-7).

Christie Davies (2009, 54-9) maintains that people are afraid of being laughed at, particularly, in societies where the main means of social control is shame, since those that are considered cases of misconduct may result in disgrace, contempt, or exclusion. In these honour-centred, hierarchical societies, individuals worry about the way in which they are perceived by others, and how this may affect their own lives and those of their relatives, friends, or colleagues. Davies believes that the fear of derision is less pressing in individualistic, capitalist, democratic societies, where notions of honour, status, and group identity are not so important. However, the fact that there are still serious cases of gelotophobia nowadays in Western countries indicates that such a concern about public perception and group identity is still relevant (see Ruch et al. 2014, 28-9, 40). Be that as it may, what seems undeniable is the relationship between shame and the fear of derisive laughter. Analysing shame and guilt cultures, Millie Creighton (1990, 285, 289) states that shame involves the

awareness of inadequacy or failure to achieve a wished-for self-image, which is accompanied by, or arises from, the fear of separation or of being placed in an inferior position within a group. Creighton contends that some degree of shame may be beneficial for the individual psyche because it creates social cohesion (1990, 292). Similarly, Peter Hacker (2017, 206) explains that shame is originated by the loss of face felt when one is seen in an indecorous condition or engaged in an activity that reveals one's failure to attain certain standards of competence, or when one fails to live up to standards of the honour code of one's peer group and that one accepts oneself. Exposure leads to humiliation and loss of honour and self-esteem. Hacker continues: "[o]ne is made an object of contempt and ridicule. One becomes exposed to the taunts and insults of others. One may be subjected to a life of abject misery from which, in extremis, the only escape may be suicide or becoming an outcast" (206). Consequently, shame is "a powerful and often terrible form of social control" (212), one that is often exerted through laughter, so no wonder people dislike and may even be afraid of being laughed at.

3 The Fear of Laughter in Early Modern England

The way laughter was conceived in early modern England was not very different from that in classical times, when it was normally seen as a form of disparagement (see Figueroa-Dorrego, Larkin-Galiñanes 2009; Sanders 1995). Most early comments about comedy, jesting, or laughter-related topics were concerned only with derisive laughter. For example, in *An Apology for Poetry* (1595), Philip Sidney defines comedy as: "an imitation of the common errors of our life, which [the comic writer] representeth in the most ridiculous and scornful sort that may be, so as it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such a one" (1973, 117). Thus he connects it with ridicule, scorn, and shame. Sidney also argues that we laugh at other people's mistakes and mishaps, and derive a kind of "scornful tickling", i.e. a sort of pleasure from such derision. Thus it is easy to infer the displeasure the butts of ridicule may derive from laughter, according to Sidney. So, following Aristotle, he recommends not to laugh at respectable or miserable people or at execrable matters.[4]

---

4 In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defines comedy as an imitation of "the Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly" and refers to "a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others" (1984, 229). In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle describes wit, the most refined and only acceptable type of humour for him, as "well-bred insolence" (1984, 123). Speakers may attempt to make their listeners laugh in order to gain their attention and goodwill, because humoristic discourse tends to be surprising, amusing, touching and, therefore, effective. Yet, this must be done with moderation, tact, and respect in order to avoid upsetting the butts or the listeners.

This Aristotelian view of comedy continued during the Restoration period, combined with Ben Jonson's theory and practice of humours characterization. In *Of Dramatick Poesie, an Essay* (1668), John Dryden states that, among English dramatists, humour is

> some extravagant habit, passion, or affection, particular […] to some one person: by the oddness of which, he is immediately distinguish'd from the rest of men; which being lively and naturally represented, most frequently begets that malicious pleasure in the Audience which is testified by laughter: as all things which are deviation from common customs are ever the aptest to produce it. (1997, 61)

Therefore, Dryden considers laughter a sign of "malicious pleasure" that is normally caused by the perception of deviant behaviour. In comedy, this laughter is produced by the presentation of humorous characters showing the imperfections of human nature. Although for Dryden the main purpose of comedy is to entertain the audience, we may suppose that the aim of exposing man's frailties is to correct them. His fellow playwright Thomas Shadwell insists more on the instructive aim of comedy. In his preface to *The Humourists* (1671), he claims that he intends "to reprehend some of the Vices and Follies of the Age, which I take to be the most proper and most useful way of writing Comedy" (1997, 86). He holds that comic dramatists must "render their Figures of Vice and Folly so ugly and detestable to make people hate and despise them" (86), and that to ridicule characters such as fops and knaves is much greater punishment than a tragic ending because it is related to shame. This gives evidence of the power awarded to scornful laughter.

From a different perspective, Robert Burton explains in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) how bitter jokes can motivate a feeling of dejection. He states that powerful people are often vexed by libels and satires, and that friendship is frequently ignored by those who only think of showing off their wit in indiscriminate derision. Burton warns that "[a] bitter jest, a slander, a calumny, pierceth deeper than any loss, danger, bodily pain, or injury whatsoever […]. Many men are undone by this means, moped, and so dejected, that are never to be recovered" (2001, 341). He argues that there are people who are more vulnerable to the harmful effect of derisive laughter because they are oversensitive and more prone to melancholy. This may be considered an early awareness of gelotophobia. Burton agrees with Sidney that sarcasm and scurrilous humour ought not to be used against our betters or people in distress. However, he approves of mirthful laughter, which may actually be a good remedy for melancholy and a source of joy and good health, so he ends his argumentation with

the following couplet: "Play with me, but hurt me not: | Jest with me, but shame me not" (2001, 342).[5]

Yet the most influential comments on laughter in early modern England are those of Thomas Hobbes in both his *Human Nature* (1650) and *Leviathan* (1651). In the former, Hobbes claims that people often laugh "at mischances and indecencies" as well as "at the infirmities of others, by comparison of which their own abilities are set off and illustrated" (1994, 54). According to Hobbes, we never laugh when people deride us or our friends. So he concludes that

> the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly […]. It is no wonder therefore that men take it heinously to be laughed at or derided, that is, triumphed over. (Hobbes 1994, 54-5)

Therefore, Hobbes sees laughter as a passion that involves a feeling of superiority and triumph in those who laugh, and one of shame and defeat in those who are laughed at. This view of laughter fits the general conception that this philosopher has of man as a creature who is constantly striving for superiority over others (Heyd 1982, 286). In *Leviathan*, Hobbes insists on the same explanation for the passion of 'sudden glory' that produces laughter in humans. He adds that laughing at other people's flaws is "a sign of Pusillanimity", mediocrity, and lack of sympathy, because "great minds" tend to be compassionate and helpful rather than derisive, and "compare themselves only with the most able" rather than with those who have defects or are less gifted (Hobbes 1973, 27). Hobbes's description of laughter is the height of the so-called 'superiority theory' of humour and a crucial reference (no matter how modulated) both in eighteenth-century comments about laughter and in present-day studies on the social aspects of humour. For instance, Richard Steele seems to agree with Hobbes when he says, in his epilogue to *The Lying Lover* (1704), that laughter is "a distorted passion, born | Of sudden self-esteem and sudden scorn" (1973, 368). And, in *The Spectator*, no. 249 (December 15, 1711), Joseph Addison argues that Hobbes's explanation of laughter holds in most cases, and that is why vain, ungenerous, nagging people are most prone to laughing at others. Addison finds this particularly worrying when those who are derided are worthy, decent people. However, "[i]f the talent of ridicule were employed to laugh men out of vice and folly, it might be of some use to the world" (Addison 1973, 379).

---

5 Burton elaborates his defence of mirth as a remedy against dejection in partition 2, section 2, member 6, subsection IV of his *Anatomy of Melancholy*. In this case, laughter is part of pleasant, playful conversation in cheerful company, which may expel grief and gladden the heart (2001, 119-26).

A very interesting – though largely ignored – early modern approach to humour is that defended by Isaac Barrow in one of his *Several Sermons on Evil-Speaking* (1678), entitled "Against Foolish Talking and Jesting". This is not the typical patristic or puritan diatribe against laughter and joking, as the title may lead us to think. Instead, Barrow argues that St Paul never meant to forbid all types of jocular discourse.[6] Barrow contends that there is one that is mirthful, harmless, and compliant with good manners and Christian duty. He argues that Christians must not be barred from mirth, which is a kind of natural, wholesome, and useful pleasure, because it may recreate our minds when tired, raise our spirits when they are low, sweeten our conversation, and "endear society" (Barrow 1678, 47). Besides, humour may be instructive and, therefore, profitable, because it may expose base and vile things: "It is many times expedient, that things really ridiculous should appear such, that they may be sufficiently loathed and shunned" (49). Facetious discourse may also be a convenient resource "for reproving some vices, and reclaiming some persons" (50-1), because it is often more efficient than other – harsher, more critical – forms of discourse. This is because people "scorn to be formally advised or taught, but they may perhaps be slyly laughed and lured into a better mind" (52), particularly if the admonition comes from relatives or friends who intend no harm nor rejection.

However, if the laughter-raising comment or situation is abusive and hurtful, and causes the feelings of displeasure and dejection, then it is uncivil and unacceptable. Among other things, Barrow points out:

> The Reputation of men is too noble a sacrifice to be offered up to vainglory, fond pleasure, or ill-humour; it is a good far more dear and precious, than to be prostituted for idle sport and divertisement. It becometh us not to trifle with that which in common estimation is of so great moment; to play rudely with a thing so very brittle, yet of so vast price; which being once broken or crackt, it is very hard, and scarce possible, to repair. (Barrow 1678, 67)

So he is aware that ridicule may cause a feeling of loss of honour that may affect people's lives seriously. Therefore, derisive laughter is too harmful to be acceptable. Shaming and dishonouring people by making them a laughingstock is an uncivil, unchristian practice, and this is one of the types of jesting that St Paul forbids in his Epistle to the Ephesians.

In her study of gender and class in early modern England, Susan Amussen (1988) has demonstrated that English society at that time was still

---

6 Barrow's sermon intends to provide a new interpretation of St Paul's advice to the Ephesians: "Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient" (Ephesians 5:4).

dominated by strict notions of honour, reputation, and social order. In other words, it was a kind of shame culture where public perception confirmed or withheld an acceptable identity. Focusing on masculinity, Mark Breitenberg (1996) and Elizabeth Foyster (1999) have shown that, in spite of the power and pervasiveness of patriarchy, masculinity was very unstable and dependent on women's actions and the opinion of others. Keith Thomas gives plenty of evidence of how the political and religious authorities of the time saw mockery as a threat to the social order. He claims that "in its affirmation of shared values, laughter could be a powerful source of social cohesion. […] mockery and derision were indispensable means of pressuring established values and condemning unorthodox behaviour" (1977, 77). He contends that Tudor and Stuart England was "a harshly intolerant popular culture, hostile to privacy and eccentricity, and relying on the sanction not of reason but of ridicule" (77). People in general were afraid of the social shame produced by ridicule, at an age when honour and reputation were the all-powerful standards ruling life in society.[7] Legal and social practices such as the stocks, the pillory, the ducking stool, and the charivari demonstrate the intimate relationship between punishment, laughter, and opprobrium in this period. Jest-books promoted derisive laughter against all forms of deviant people, and 'others' in general – such as foreigners, cripples, madmen, women, and members of the lower classes. As was said before, comedy was used with the (real or pretended) aim of exposing and correcting follies, affectations, and eccentricities. To this we can add other literary genres such as satire, lampoon, libel, and epigram, in which ridicule is also linked to public shame.

4　The Fear of Laughter in Restoration Prose Fiction

Early modern prose fiction also provides a large number of examples of disparagement humour. As happens in jest-books, in picaresque fiction, rogue pamphlets and criminal biographies (genres that often overlapped in England, see Salzman 1985, 202-40) characters are very often cheated, and laughed at as a consequence. For example, in George Fidge's *The English Gusman* (1652), the thief James Hind is presented as a trickster who robs and plays pranks. One of his victims is a London citizen to whom he sells his horse but later escapes with it. When the citizen tells the incident to some people expecting some sympathy, he is jeered instead, and

---

7　Joy Wiltenburg has recently collected and commented on several early modern documents showing "how powerfully ridicule could generate fear of becoming its target" (2016, 36). One of the quotations she provides is from one of Dorothy Osborne's letters to her husband, in which she acknowledges: "I confess that I have an humour that will not suffer me to expose myself to people's scorn" (37).

he despondently asks them: "Gentlemen, forbear, for this is worse than the loss of all, to be laughed at" (1652, 6). The sequential structure of this narrative, as happens in all rogue fiction of the time, does not allow us to know much more about this character. However, his words clearly evince how much taunting laughter afflicts this London citizen. For him, being jeered (i.e. publicly humiliated) is worse than losing his property. This episode also shows the laughers' lack of compassion towards someone who has been robbed. They callously prefer to disparage the victim for having been so easily outwitted by Hind, who is thus placed in a position of intellectual superiority.

Similarly, in the anonymous *The London Jilt* (1683), Cornelia's father is cheated and robbed by a rope dancer who laughs at him before leaving him on the floor with a broken leg. When the news is told, the neighbours also laugh at his folly and at his wife's angry reaction. From then on, his business and marriage life go so bad that he gets depressed and dies shortly afterwards. In this case, the distress caused by derisive laughter is so extreme that it leads to dejection and eventual death, which reminds us of both Hacker's and Burton's words mentioned above. Moreover, in one of the episodes of this picaresque novel, Squire Limberham foolishly pretends to be the father of his wife's chambermaid in order to rebut speculations of his being impotent because he has no children. As a consequence, he is accused and tried for adultery, and sentenced to pay 50 guineas to the maid. The heroine-narrator says: "This Sentence was very much commended by all People, and Squire Limberham's Traffick was so laught at by all People, that for a while he durst hardly appear abroad, for the Affair was so publick that the whole Town pointed at him" (Anon. 2007, 66). Shamed by society due to his foolishness and what is considered deficient masculinity, the squire ostracises himself, unable to cope with that social pressure marked by laughter. As was said before, low self-esteem, introversion, and social withdrawal are usual consequences of gelotophobia.

Characters afraid of derisive laughter and of the effect that it may have in their reputation can also be found in some novels by Aphra Behn. In *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684-87), Octavio is particularly sensitive to the manner in which his affair with Silvia may affect the public opinion about him. When, in the second part of this novel, she sends him a letter saying that, as Philander has been unfaithful to her, she is now free and willing to accept his love vows, he writes her back confessing that he is too weak to resist her charms, even if it is

> only to draw me from a Virtue which has been hitherto the Pride and Beauty of my youth, the Glory of my name, my Comfort and refuge in all extreams of Fortune: The eternal Companion, Guide and Counsellor of all my actions: Yet this good you only have power to rob me of, and leave me expos'd to the scorn of all the laughing World. (Behn 1993, 203)

Octavio is the only upright character in the cynical world of this novel, so dominated by infidelity, selfishness, and betrayal. He has built a good reputation over the years that he is worried to lose by starting this liaison with Silvia. Although his infatuation proves to be stronger than his apprehensions, his fears of becoming the butt of scornful laughter attest to his feeling of shame for having failed to maintain the positive self-image that he has created. When Silvia later resumes her affair with Philander, Octavio complains to her in another letter in the third part of the novel: "tell me how thou has undone me thus? Why thou shouldest chuse out me from all the Crowd of fond admiring Fools, to make the World's Reproach, and turn to ridicule" (369). So, Octavio verbalises again his fears of being laughed at by people, this time because he has been jilted by a young girl who has been seduced by her brother-in-law, Philander, who is also Octavio's friend. This obviously casts doubts on his masculinity and damages his good social reputation. His soft, amorous nature makes him dote on her so much that he has neglected his business; so his friends and relatives criticise him for "having given himself over to Effeminacy" (280). He finally decides to forget about her and enter a monastery, which symbolises the social death that disrepute implies. Thus, his affair with Silvia shows a clear reversal of gender roles of the usual treatment of the seduction theme in Restoration and eighteenth-century prose fiction.[8]

In Behn's *The History of the Nun: or The Fair Vow-Breaker* (1689), Isabella shows her anxiety about being the object of public derision in two crucial moments of the story. First when she, shortly after becoming a nun, falls in love with Henault. That presents her with a serious dilemma for which she finds no easy satisfactory solution:

> she cannot fly from the Thoughts of the Charming *Henault*, and 'tis impossible to quit em; and, at this rate, she found, Life could not long support it self, but would either reduce her to Madness, and so render her an hated Object of Scorn to the Censuring World, or force her Hand to commit a Murder upon her self. (Behn 1995, 225-6)

Isabella is afraid of the emotional instability that she may suffer if she represses her feelings towards Henault due to the vows of chastity she has recently made. An insane nun, crazy with love, would not be accepted by the society of the time, and would be the victim of public censure and scornful laughter.

As Bergson (1980), Martineau (1972) and other commentators on the social function of laughter have argued, people use laughter as a sign

---

8 On the seduction theme, see Ballaster (1992). On Behn's *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and his Sister*, see, for instance, Pollak 1993, Todd 1996, Ballaster 2004, and Ahern 2005.

of disapproval, in order to expose, humiliate, and correct the deviant. Isabella finally resolves to prioritise love and elopes from the monastery with Henault. This decision leads to a series of misfortunes in their lives: rejection from their families, disinheritance, financial problems and so on. Henault goes to war and is reported dead; she marries Villenoys; but one day he unexpectedly returns. This causes confusion in Isabella's mind, who worries about the consequences that this new situation of bigamy may bring about:

> She finds, by his Return, she is not only expos'd to all the Shame imaginable; to all the Upbraiding, on his part, when he shall know she is marry'd to another; but all the Fury and Rage of *Villenoys*, and the Scorn of the Town, who will look on her as an Adulteress. (Behn 1995, 249)

She feels such a strong personal and social pressure that she desperately ends up killing both husbands, eventually confessing her murders and being publicly executed. This is a story about the negative consequences of violating vows, but also, quite meaningfully, about women's difficulties to counter the constraints and pressures of society, sometimes expressed through scornful comments and laughter.[9]

I will now focus on Alexander Oldys's *The Fair Extravagant*, which is an interesting novel for its literary treatment of the fear of laughter, and has received very little critical attention so far.[10] It is reminiscent of the type of comedies written in the 1670s and early 1680s, with a witty heroine who cross-dresses in order to find a prospective husband, and a hero that belongs to a group of Tory gallants who are keen on drinking, flirting, and railing against marriage. It is a story that shows the recurrent concern about unruly women and the tensions of power in couples, and how this concern is related to expectations about masculinity in the rakish Carolean period. It is related with much irony and with reference to the politics, literature, and social life of Restoration London.

In spite of its full title, *The Fair Extravagant, or, The Humorous Bride*, the story focuses more on the hero than on the eponymous heroine. Ariadne sets up the action and controls the plot, but Polydor soon occupies centre stage and the narrative becomes a trial of his qualities, particularly of his manhood. Wealthy, seventeen-year-old Ariadne determines to find a man she could marry and for that purpose she puts on her brother's clothes, so that she can interact with men more freely. She finally chooses

---

9 For studies on *The History of the Nun*, see Pearson 1991 and 1993, and Goulding 2008.

10 There is no modern edition of Alexander Oldys's works, nor any book-length study about them. The only critical essays to focus on this novel are Figueroa-Dorrego 2008 and 2009. Nicholas Hudson devotes some pages to speak to Oldys, whom he considers "an important and unjustly ignored innovator in the history of English prose fiction" (2005, 577).

Polydor, a thirty-year-old gentleman belonging to a good family but, as he was the youngest son, inheriting only a small fortune. Pretending to be her own cousin, Ariadne tells him that her cousin (i.e. herself) wants to meet him the following morning in the park in order to marry him, but that he cannot see her face until the wedding. Taking into account the information he is given of her beauty, virtues, and prospective inheritance, Polydor is tempted by the offer yet cannot believe that it can be a true and serious one. That night at home he cannot sleep thinking that she may be a cheat and that his friends, "some of 'em Witty, Satyrical Rogues", will taunt him and ask:

> Is this he who was wont to help us Laugh at all those Sots that durst hazard their Carkasses with one Woman for better for worse? And is this Jolly Debauché, at last overtaken? Nay more, Jilted by a Lewd Woman, pretended Heiress? (1682, 35-6)

Polydor is afraid of being the butt of his friends' laughter. He belongs to a group of rakes who usually laugh at married men, and believes that his acceptance of a wedding with that mysterious woman will place him outside the group and make him a possible victim of their raillery. Yet the ridicule would be greater if she happened to be a cheat, because this would mean that he would be duped and – worse – by a woman. Following the theories of scholars such as Martineau (1972) and English (1994), it can be said that, when Polydor and his rakish friends laugh at married men, they express their hostility against those who deviate from their own way of understanding a masculinity, because they consider it foolish for a man to commit oneself to only one woman and to a dull family life. Yet, if Polydor's bride did not happen to be the beautiful, virtuous, wealthy lady she claims to be, then his witty friends would also taunt him for not sharing their intellectual abilities. Thus Polydor fears his friends' laughter because he is ashamed of not living up to the standards of masculinity prevailing in his peers' group (Hacker 2017, 206).

In spite of all his doubts and anxieties, Polydor resolves to take the risk, and meets the young heiress. They get married but Ariadne abandons him that very same evening, in order to test his patience and constancy for a week. He does not know it, and gets angry at believing himself cheated as he had feared. He tries to find her in her brother's house, but by then she has arranged that her cousin Dorothea should impersonate her and pretend she does not know him. For Polydor this confirms the idea that he has been fooled, and becomes deeply melancholic. He writes satirical verses against women, complains about his credulity, and expresses his fear of becoming the laughingstock of the family: "what will thy Mother, thy Brother, thy Sisters, and all thy Relations say to this, will they not scorn thee?" (81). He will be subject of town talk and become dishonoured: "I

am Lost, Ruin'd, and Eternally Miserable" (82). He considers that his pru-
dence, intellect, and manliness have been belittled by Ariadne, and fears
the contempt and ostracism of his relatives, friends, and the society in
general. Therefore, he again suffers from the same shame-bound anxiety
that is the basis of gelotophobia.

In order to finish off her tormenting trial of Polydor, Ariadne asks her
suitor Marwood to accuse Polydor of the debts contracted before his mar-
riage. As a result, Polydor is imprisoned. In jail he receives the visit of his
jocular, rakish friends, who continue making fun of his situation. Harry
asks him: "Why were there not Wives enow in the Town of other Mens but
you must needs get one of your own!" (139), and wonders why such a rich
heiress should wish to marry him. Polydor reproaches them for laughing at
him instead of offering advice and help, and warns them: "It may fall to my
share to laugh at you, yet e'er I die". To which Harry retorts: "Ay, if your
Spouse shou'd prove a right Diamond and no Counterfeit [...] you might
laugh at us for laughing at you", and advises him to "ease [his] Spleen
the other way" (141) – in other words, Polydor should calm down and try
to cheer up. Harry's remarks seem to demonstrate that he and the other
friends do not feel guilty for laughing at Polydor, as they do not really in-
tend to disparage him harshly, but only to have fun in a convivial manner.
They never mean to denigrate and exclude Polydor from the group, but
his gelotophobia does not allow him to see that laughter may at times be
joyful, playful, and harmless, that it is not always used to deprecate others
(see Titze 2009; Proyer, Ruch 2010). Harry reminds Polydor that he may
also laugh at them, particularly if Ariadne finally proves to be no fraud
after all. In fact they never abandon him and, at the end, Polydor invites
them to celebrate the "second" wedding: "Come [...] We are all friends"
(178). Thus, the novel finishes with the typical comic ending of harmony
and conviviality overcoming the moments of anxiety caused by fictitious
deception.

5 Conclusion

The fear of derisive laughter was a common concern for early modern
commentators about laughter, humour, and comedy, as well as for a con-
siderable amount of characters in Restoration prose fiction. This reveals
the powerful social pressure that the shame-culture prevailing in England
exerted on people, and that scornful laughter was often the mark or vehi-
cle of such pressure. To a larger or lesser extent, people felt themselves
hurt and humiliated when they became the butts of derisive laughter, or
were afraid that this might ever happen. They were worried about their
reputation and how this might affect their lives. The presence of this kind
of fear is evident in the cases analysed here: in the citizen cheated by Hind

in *The English Gusman*, in Cornelia's father and in Squire Limberham in *The London Jilt*, in Octavio in *Love-Letters*, in Isabella in *The History of the Nun*, and in Polydor in *The Fair Extravagant*. Focusing on the latter, it is obvious that the actions of the "fair extravagant" and "humorous bride" Ariadne unsettle Polydor's life, who sees his gender identity challenged by her unconventional marriage proposal and sudden disappearance. First, he is afraid that his rakish, marriage-hating friends may mock him if he accepts her proposal, and then he fears the laughter of his relatives for being abandoned by his bride just after the wedding. Thus Polydor seems to believe that Ariadne's unorthodox behaviour threatens not only the homosocial bonds that he has with his friends, and the coherence of his commitment to libertinism, but also his masculinity in general, because her apparent deceit leads him to think that he has acted imprudently and cannot control his wife. He is afraid that his friends and relatives may scorn him for his weakness, and this may seriously affect his reputation. Therefore, Polydor shows symptoms of, at least temporary, gelotophobia as the result of Ariadne's unexpected conduct. And this is due to the inter-relationship between derision and shame and also to the manner in which men's psychological stability and social reputation depended on women's behaviour at that time.

Bibliography

Addison, Joseph (1973). *"The Spectator*, No. 249 (1711)"*. McMillin, Scott (ed.), *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Comedy*. New York: Norton, 378-80.

Ahern. Stephen (2005). "'Glorious ruine': Romantic Excess and the Politics of Sensibility in Behn's *Love-Letters*". *Restoration*, 29(1), 29-45.

Amussen, Susan D. (1988). *An Ordered Society. Gender and Class in Early Modern England*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Aristotle (1984). *The Rhetoric and the Poetics of Aristotle*. Transl. by W. Rhys Roberts and Ingram Bywater. New York: Modern Library.

Ballaster, Ros (1992). *Seductive Fiction. Women's Amatory Fiction from 1684 to 1740*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ballaster, Ros (2004). "'The Story of the Heart': *Love-Letters Between and Noble-Man and his Sister*". Hughes, Derek; Todd, Janet (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 135-50. DOI `https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol0521820197.009`.

Barrow, Isaac (1678). *Several Sermons Against Evil Speaking*. London: Brabazon Aylmer.

Behn, Aphra (1993). *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and his Sister*. Vol. 2 of *The Works of Aphra Behn*. Edited by Janet Todd. London: Wil-

liam Pickering. DOI `https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9781851960132.book.1`.

Behn, Aphra (1995). *The History of the Nun*. Vol. 3 of *The Works of Aphra Behn*. Edited by Janet Todd. London: William Pickering, 205-58. DOI `https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9781851960149.book.1`.

Bergson, Henri [1900] (1980). "Laughter". Sypher, Wylie (ed.), *Comedy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 61-190.

Breitenberg, Mark (1996). *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Burton, Robert (2001). *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Edited by Holbrook Jackson. New York: New York Review of Books.

Creighton, Millie (1990). "Revisiting Shame and Guilt Cultures: A Forty-Year Pilgrimage". *Ethos*, 18(3), 279-307. DOI `https://doi.org/10.1525/eth.1990.18.3.02a00030`.

Davies, Christie (2009). "Humor Theory and the Fear of Being Laughed at". *Humor*, 22(1-2), 49-62. DOI `https://doi.org/10.1515/humr.2009.003`.

Dryden, John (1997). "Of Dramatick Poesie, An Essay (1668)". Womersley, David (ed.), *Augustan Critical Writing*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 15-78.

English, James (1994). *Comic Transactions. Literature, Humour, and the Politics of Community in Twentieth-Century Britain*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Ferguson, Mark A.; Ford, Thomas E. (2008). "Disparagement Humor: A Theoretical and Empirical Review of Psychoanalytic, Superiority, and Social Identity Theories". *Humor*, 21(3), 283-312. DOI `https://doi.org/10.1515/humor.2008.014`.

Figueroa-Dorrego, Jorge (2008). "Alexander Oldys's Comic Displacement of Romance in *The Fair Extravagant*". Lorenzo-Modia; M. Jesús (eds), *Proceedings from the 21st AEDEAN Conference*. A Coruña: Universidade da Coruña, 433-42.

Figueroa-Dorrego, Jorge (2009). "Ariadne's Adaptation of Alexander Oldys's *The Fair Extravagant* in *She Ventures and He Wins*". *SEDERI*, 18, 177-88.

Figueroa-Dorrego, Jorge; Larkin-Galiñanes, Cristina (eds) (2009). *A Source Book of Literary and Philosophical Writings About Humour and Laughter*. Lewiston (NY): Edwin Mellen Press.

Ford, Thomas; Richardson, Kyle; Petit, Whitney (2015). "Disparagement Humor and Prejudice: Contemporary Theory and Research". *Humor*, 28(2), 171-86. DOI `https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2015-0017`.

Foyster, Elizabeth (1999). *Manhood in Early Modern England. Honour, Sex and Marriage*. London: Longman. DOI `https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315840901`.

Goulding, Susan (2008). "Aphra Behn's *Stories of Nuns*: Narrative Diversions and *Sister Books*". *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 10(1), 38-55.

Hacker, Peter (2017). "Shame, Embarrassment, and Guilt". *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 41, 202-24. DOI `https://doi.org/10.1111/misp.12073`.

Heyd, David (1982). "The Place of Laughter in Hobbes's Theory of Emotion". *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 43(2), 285-95. DOI `https://doi.org/10.2307/2709204`.

Hobbes, Thomas (1973). *Leviathan*. London: Dent.

Hobbes, Thomas (1994). *Human Nature and De Corpore Politico*. Edited by J.C.A. Gaskin. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hudson, Nicholas (2005). "Social Rank, 'The Rise of the Novel', and Whig Histories of Eighteenth-Century Fiction". *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 17(4), 563-98. DOI `https://doi.org/10.1353/ecf.2005.0009`.

Martineau, William (1972). "A Model of the Social Functions of Humor". Goldstein, Jeffrey; McGhee, Paul (eds), *The Psychology of Humor*. New York: Academic Press, 101-25. DOI `https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-288950-9.50011-0`.

Morreall, John (1983). *Taking Laughter Seriously*. Albany (NY): State University of New York Press.

Oldys, Alexander (1682). *The Fair Extravagant, or, The Humorous Bride. An English Novel*. London: Charles Blount.

Pearson, Jacqueline (1991). "Gender and Narrative in the Fiction of Aphra Behn". *The Review of English Studies*, 42(165), 40-56, and 42(166), 170-90. DOI `https://doi.org/10.1093/res/xlii.165.40` and `https://doi.org/10.1093/res/xlii.166.179`.

Pearson, Jacqueline (1993). "The History of *The History of the Nun*". Hutner, Heidi (ed.), *Rereading Aphra Behn: History, Theory, and Criticism*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 234-52.

Platt, Tracey; Ruch, Willibald (2009). "The Emotions of Gelotophobes: Shameful, Fearful, and Joyless?". *Humor*, 22(1-2), 91-110. DOI `https://doi.org/10.1515/humr.2009.005`.

Pollak, Ellen (1993). "Beyond Incest: Gender and the Politics of Transgression in Aphra Behn's Love-Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister". Hutner, Heidi (ed.), *Rereading Aphra Behn: History, Theory, and Criticism*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 151-86.

Proyer, René; Ruch, Willibald (2010). "Dispositions Towards Ridicule and Being Laughed at: Current Research on Gelotophobia, Gelotophilia, and Katagelasticism". *Psychological Test and Assessment Modeling*, 52(1), 49-59.

Ruch, Willibald (2009). "Fearing Humor? Gelotophobia: The Fear of Being Laughed at. Introduction and Overview". *Humor*, 22(1-2), 1-25. DOI `https://doi.org/10.1515/humr.2009.001`.

Ruch, Willibald; Proyer, René (2008). "The Fear of Being Laughed at: Individual and Group Differences in Gelotophobia". *Humor*, 21(1), 47-67. DOI `https://doi.org/10.1515/humor.2008.002`.

Ruch, Willibald; Proyer, René (2009). "Who Fears Being Laughed at? The Location of Gelotophobia in the Eysenckian PEN-Model of Personality".

Personality and Individual Differences, 46, 627-30. DOI `https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2009.01.004`.

Ruch, Willibald; Hofmann, Jenifer; Platt, Tracey; Royer, René (2014). "The State-of-the Art in Gelotophobia Research: A Review and Some Theoretical Extensions". *Humor*, 27(1), 23-45. DOI `https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2013-0046`.

Salzman, Paul (1985). *English Prose Fiction, 1558-1700. A Critical History*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Sanders, Barry (1995). *Sudden Glory. Laughter as Subversive History*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Shadwell, Thomas (1997). "Preface to *The Humorists* (1671)". Womersley, David (ed.), *Augustan Critical Writing*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 85-93.

Sidney, Philip (1973). *An Apology for Poetry*. Edited by Geoffrey Shepherd. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Steele, Richard (1973). "Epilogue to *The Lying Lover* (1704)". McMillin, Scott (ed.), *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Comedy*. New York: Norton, 367-68.

The London Jilt 2007 = *The London Jilt* (2007). Edited by Charles Hinnant. Peterborough: Broadview Press.

Thomas, Keith (1977). "The place of laughter in Tudor and Stuart England". *Times Literary Magazine*, 21, 77-81.

Titze, Michael (2009). "Gelotophobia: The Fear of Being Laughed at". *Humor*, 22(1-2), 27-48. DOI `https://doi.org/10.1515/humr.2009.002`.

Todd, Janet (1996). "Who is Silvia? What is She? Feminine Identity in Apha Behn's *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and his Sister*". Todd, Janet (ed.), *Aphra Behn Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 199-217.

Wiltenburg, Joy (2016). "Soundings of Laughter in Early Modern England: Women, Men, and Everyday Uses of Humor". *Early Modern Women*, 10(2), 22-41. DOI `https://doi.org/10.1353/emw.2016.0002`.

Zillman, Dolf; Cantor, Joanne (1976). "A Disposition Theory of Humour and Mirth". Chapman, Antony; Foot, Hugh (eds), *Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research and Application*. London: John Wiley & Sons, 93-115.